

# Shakespeare's Children

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Shakespeare had a thing for children. Ann Blake counts 30, Mark Heberle 39, Mark Lawhorn 45, and Carol Chillington Rutter counts well over 50 child parts. What it means that Shakespeare included more child figures in his plays and poems than his contemporaries remains an incitement to conversation as a recent burst of scholarship makes evident. That this interest follows the institutionalization of the study of children's literature and the formation of childhood studies programs is instructive. Approaches taken by humanities scholars may not hold the same political sway as psychological or sociological studies, some of which have real implications for the policies and standards that impact the lives of actual children. But since attempts to tell the history of childhood often produce fantasies of the ideal, sentimental child, the works of Shakespeare offer an opportunity to understand constructions and fictions of childhood in a time of the rapidly shifting cultural and historical valuation of children. This essay examines central questions and problems in the study of early modern child figures, reviews past approaches to and recent publications on early modern children, suggests topics yet to be explored in the context of the child figures of Shakespeare and his contemporaries (sexuality, temporality, sovereignty, humanity, and economy), and concludes by suggesting we think of Shakespeare's children not as strictly historical or affective objects but, rather, as figures pressed to signify with respect to cultural expectations of value, sovereignty, and futurity.

## *The Problem Child*

In a special issue of *American Psychologist*, published in October 1979 in the midst of the 'International Year of the Child', William Kessen admitted that

a clear eyed study of what experts have said about the young ... will expose as bewildering a taxonomy as the one provided by preachers, parents, and poets. No other animal species has been cataloged by responsible scholars in so many wildly discrepant forms, forms that a perceptive extraterrestrial could never see as reflecting the same beast. (815)

Kessen's suggestive analogies, beasts and extraterrestrials, seem apt in that attention lavished on that figure has, ironically, created greater ambiguity. The potent ambiguity of the child has a history that transects and defines the works of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries. While Kessen identifies, perhaps jokingly, the problem as one of species, the historicity of child presents its own complexities. Philippe Ariès set off a veritable avalanche of scholarship with his contentiously influential *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), and a growing community of scholars has spent decades constructing an archive of the history of children and childhood with materials gathered from a variety of cultural domains, case studies based upon a range of periods and locations, and critical approaches drawn from a dizzying array of disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

Much debate in the history of childhood has centered on alterity. Scholars have tended to ask how *different* children and the cultural codes associated with childhood in various eras might be. And when scholars have focused attention on the historical differences in the history of children and childhood, they have approached that question primarily through notions of *sentiment*. Michael Anderson's *Approaches to the History of the Western Family* (1980) began to designate an entire branch of the history of childhood as the sentiments approach. Included in this category would be the work of Ariès who attempts to identify a wholly different sensibility about children, one that would explain an apparent dearth of artistic and literary representations in medieval Europe. For Ariès, early modern developments in portraiture, games, clothing, and terminology gradually reveal a relatively new focus on children as beings quite distinct from adults. Ariès asserts rather boldly that 'In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken, or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society' (Ariès 125). Similarly, Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt sought, in the wake of Ariès, to understand shifting attitudes toward children in early modern Europe as they transform from the 'young of the species and the chattels of parents' to 'a special age group of the community with a newly defined status based upon legal rights safeguarded by the state' (Pinchbeck and Hewitt vii).

Whole essays have been and still could be written detailing the countless objections raised to Ariès. A host of accounts of medieval childhood, for instance, sprang up in the wake of *Centuries of Childhood*, not least of which are Linda Pollock's *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations 1500–1900*, Barbara Hanawalt's *Growing Up In Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*, and Nicholas Orme's *Medieval Children*. Many objections

center on the affective implications of the study of the history of childhood. Although Ariès distinguishes between a lack of a developed awareness of ‘the idea of childhood’ and a lack of ‘affection for children’, which he states are decidedly not the same, others concluded in his wake that absences of representations of children combined with the demographic realities of infant mortality and overpopulation resulted in relatively detached parent–child relationships. Ivy and Pinchbeck describe a jarring difference between contemporary and Tudor attitudes:

Accustomed as we are now to the centrality of the child in the family and to exhaustive studies of the motives, thoughts and activities of children, the lack of importance attached to childhood in Tudor England seems on first acquaintance astonishing. It becomes less astonishing, however, when one remembers how brief the total span of life – particularly of infant life – could be in the sixteenth century. (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 4)

Lawrence Stone’s influential *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* similarly asserts ‘fairly remote’ relations between parents and children as a consequence of high infant mortality rates ‘which made it folly to invest too much emotional capital in such ephemeral beings’ (105). Even more extreme would be Lloyd DeMause’s thesis that ‘the history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awake’. With respect to the child: ‘The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and sexually abused’ (24).

Responses to Ariès, Stone, Pinchbeck and Hewitt, DeMause, and others serve as a useful corrective but also constitute a sentimental backlash. Pollock’s *Forgotten Children* opens with reference to the ‘almost monotonous regularity the same idea appears again and again in the discussion of the history of childhood: that there was no concept of childhood in the past’ (1). On the one hand, Pollock usefully alters this trajectory, adding to the complex story of childhood historical detail drawn from diaries and other materials, which reveal a more complete and emotionally rich portrait of attitudes toward children. On the other hand, Pollock props her argument on evolutionary theory, suggesting that forms of indifference to children would constitute an unlikely divergence from typical primate behavior. Thus, she grounds sentiment in the law of nature:

The biological necessity to reproduce is universally strong because ultimately offspring represent the only means of leaving genetic representation in the next generation. Animals do have a diversity of parental investment strategies available to them; but the options are not unlimited. (34)

Unlike Kessen, Pollock reaches for species language to anchor the sentimental child in a scientific truth that defies historical difference.

No doubt many ways of thinking and feeling contributed to medieval and early modern attitudes to children. Steven Mintz’s study *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood* identifies in premodern America ‘far less sentimentalizing of children as special beings who were more innocent and vulnerable than adults’, but he also represents a wide range of attitudes about the nature of children and their resulting needs for discipline and education (viii). Mintz refers to the massive economic transformation and population crisis of 16th century England that made for strict attention to children in colonial America:

Religious and secular authorities regarded childhood as a form of deficiency and incompleteness, and adults rarely referred to their childhood with nostalgia or fondness. Infants were viewed as unformed and even animalistic because of their inability to speak or stand upright. (3)

While Puritans focused on depravity and humanists focused on educability, Anglican traditionalists,

regarded childhood as a repository of virtues that were rapidly disappearing from English society.<sup>2</sup> For them, the supposed innocence, playfulness, and obedience of children served as a symbolic link with their highly idealized conception of a past 'Merrie England' characterized by parish unity, a stable and hierarchical order, and communal celebrations. (11)

This potent blend of attitudes, Mintz suggests, produced

'a fixation on childhood corruption, child nurture, and schooling that remains undiminished in the United States today'. (10)

Pervasive anxiety about children is by no means restricted to the United States and, arguably, saturates the field of the history of childhood, which strains to preserve, save, defend, or recover the child from the dark abyss of time. Historian of childhood Hugh Cunningham opens *The Invention of Childhood*, a popular text produced in tandem with Radio 4 broadcasts, by citing mid 16th-century Protestant preacher Thomas Becon who asks, 'What is a child, or to be a child?' (Cunningham and Morpurgo 12). Presumably this is the question Cunningham's text, advertised as treating 'a thousand years of British childhood', should answer. But Becon's *The Demands of Holy Scripture* is an exegetical work that defines scriptural terms. Becon may, as Cunningham argues, 'alert us to how many possible different answers there are' to the question of 'what is a child, or to be a child' but absolutely none of Becon's answers refer to actual children. Becon continues to detail a series of metaphorical children:

A child in scripture is a wicked man, or he is a child, that is ignorant and not exercised in godliness and God's word, be he old, or be he young: what' or he that lacketh spiritual judgment in discerning and choosing things... . A child also is sometime taken for humble or meek. (Becon 607)

Even more vexed is the stage play, *The Voices of Children* by former Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo, appended to Cunningham's study, which fully realizes a fantasy of rescuing the past through imaginative reconstruction. The dramatic scenario features a child named Hugh and his sister Beaty, who attend a birthday party. While all the children are dressed in historically accurate costumes, Hugh and Beaty are not because their mother mishears the theme of the party, historical, as hysterical (that is humorous). Finding her error less than hilarious, Hugh and Beaty stomp away from the party and notice an upturned oak tree with its extensive root system exposed to suggest impressive age. As they consider the tree, a host of children emerge from the party, changing costumes occasionally, to represent the children of various ages: Anglo-Saxon Cedd (the planter of the oak tree) followed by medieval Alexander and Peter, Puritan William, and so on. Each teaches of a particular moment in time by rhyming, gamboling, or suffering in period appropriate costumes. The play ends with the significantly educated Hugh and Beaty planting an acorn, playing blind man's bluff with the 'historical' children before lapsing into 'disco dancing' as a sapling rises from the crater of the fallen oak.

It would be harder to find a more compact or clumsy figuration of the pervasive sentimentality that afflicts approaches to the history of childhood and of the fantasy of reconstruction that animates many such projects. The unit composed of Cunningham's history and Morpurgo's play completes a shift from history to fantasy, as if from scattered educational treatises, diaries, demographic information, literary and artistic representations, medical tracts, or childrearing books a verisimilar child could be reverse engineered, one who defies the fact that children almost never left behind their own records, opinions, or interpretations of the cultural moments in which they lived.

Cunningham and Morpurgo's text is public and popular, not scholarly. Given the ambition of such a volume, it would be easy to look past Cunningham's own impressive additions to the history of childhood.<sup>3</sup> But this particular collision of sentiment and historicity is also typical of much scholarly work on children and childhood. We might take, for instance, Margaret L. King's impressive survey of the study of the history of childhood in Western Europe, published in the flagship journal *Renaissance Quarterly*. She claims to survey concepts of childhood, yet most of the works she discusses expand upon a fairly familiar sentiments-based history of the child, from family history into educational history, with a few forays into demography and poverty studies. In her attempt to answer the question 'Where we might go' in the study of children, she advocates for a greater historical range (filling in 'the silent years' missed by current studies), wider geographical coverage ('Is the West exceptional?' she asks), and more information about life experiences related to childhood (including childbirth, childrearing, and education. In spite of her attempt to move past merely sentimental accounts of children, her approach to 'concepts of childhood' seems full of historical material on the experience of childhood but significantly lacking in sophisticated conceptual approaches to the roles the child played in the cultural imaginary. Thus, scholars are as much constructing a child out of historical materials as they are attending to historical constructions of childhood. If, too often, scholars attentive to children and childhood articulate their own fantasies of the child waiting to be found when one looks to history, what might scholars attentive to Shakespeare find in his fictional child constructs?

### ***Figuring Shakespeare's Children***

Imaginative investments play a greater role in the construction of the figure of the child in early modernity than perhaps has been admitted. Thus, while on the one hand Shakespeare studies has been invigorated by interdisciplinary approaches to the history of childhood, the promise of Shakespeare's child figures is that they provide access to the very process by which adult urgencies and cultural drives produce a particular fantasy of the child. Although still emerging, strong scholarship on the nature of the Shakespearean child already accomplishes an important goal, which is to understand these figures as hybrids of history and imagination. While Shakespeare's child figures have not gone unnoticed, only more recently have they been at the forefront of research agendas. As Robert Shaughnessy argues in the introduction to the collection *Shakespeare and Childhood* (2007), 'As far as the first three centuries of Shakespeare criticism were concerned the children in, behind, or implied by Shakespeare's plays were intermittently seen but rarely heard about (and certainly not heard.)' (2). But the new millennium witnessed a burst of scholarly activity that redresses this significant lacuna in early modern studies. In addition to *Shakespeare and Childhood*, we should consider the collection edited by Andrea

Immel and Michael Witmore, *Childhood and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (2006), and three monographs: Morriss Henry Partee's *Childhood in Shakespeare's Plays* (2006), Carol Chillington Rutter's *Shakespeare and Child's Play: Performing Lost Boys on Stage and Screen* (2007), and Michael Witmore's *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* (2007). While these works apply various approaches to child in literary and dramatic works of Shakespeare's era, common themes tie together most of this scholarship.

An important development in the study of early modern children has been the advent of a kind of archive fever. In her contribution to *Shakespeare and Childhood*, Kate Chedgzoy cites Immel and Witmore's collection as an exemplary instance of the 'undertaking primary research that enriches and extends the available data on children and childhood across as many domains as possible' (21). Chedgzoy herself begins with the writings of Lady Rachel Fane, a Northamptonshire teen who staged masques and other performances that resonate with the works of Shakespeare. Fane becomes a tempting analogy for *The Tempest's* Miranda, and in this the point of Chedgzoy's juxtaposition becomes clear. In 'Shakespeare's figurations of childhood, we may find clues to the kinds of questions we need to ask of these and other sources in order to enrich our understanding of a child's view of the early modern world' (19). The complexity of perspectives in theater 'can offer us ways of glimpsing situations from a child's point of view'. Catherine Belsey, who describes the child figures of Shakespeare's plays as vulnerable and mischievous, focuses on sovereign children as indices conflict between royal authority and childish incapacity. In *Richard III*, she argues, Shakespeare 'invests the children with an independent role ... and childhood itself with concerns, capacities, and responsibilities of its own' (46).

Like other scholars who view the elusive child as an historical object of study and a disenfranchised subject of rights, Chedgzoy articulates a veritable liberation theology of the child in her project to 'excavate the culture of childhood and the agency of children' (26). As Andrea Immel puts it:

Children too often have qualified as another silent population by virtue of their necessary subjection to adult authority. But it may not be as simple to "retrieve" the place and experiences of children as a marginal group as it has been for other groups like workers, subalterns, or women because, unlike these other groups, children have always suffered from being too intelligible to those who wish to understand their condition. It is assumed that since everyone was once a child, therefore anyone can intuitively grasp the nature of childhood experience. (6)

The impulse to retrieve animates many essays in *Childhood and Children's Books in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800*, including those by Claire Busse, who addresses the significance of child actors on the stage whose celebrity status was at odds with their status as company property, Michael Mascuch, who explores the power of orality and embodiment in the religious ministry of 16-year-old Sarah Wight, and A. J. Piesse, who approaches the way in which the representation of children's education shows how pedagogy actively builds a self, or character, responsive to certain ideas about textuality and history.

The easy immediacy of the reflex to historicize may obscure the danger of such acts of recovery. Immel, Chedgzoy, and others construe adult perspectives as occlusions of or limitations to the elaboration of children's perspectives and child agency. Indeed, the attempt to recover children's

agency in the long reception of Shakespeare for children makes much more sense, as the essays in the second half of *Shakespeare and Childhood* demonstrate. Victorian and later cultures afford the child a different position as quasi-subjects, cultural ideals, and even as consumers. One might argue that the reception of Shakespeare in these centuries played a critical role in the development of understandings of the nature of childhood and the possibility of children's agency. But it is important to note that the impulse to make this 'silent population' speak emerges from contemporary rights discourses that depend on forms of liberal political thought barely emergent in early modern Europe. This project of recovering children's agency has been articulated by Jacqueline Bhabha, who explores the legal status of the contemporary child, diagnosing 'the position of children in human rights doctrine: they are included in the broad scope of protection but peripheral to the framing conception of agency' (1526). Yet as Shakespeare's children make clear, this dialectic of agency and protection seems inadequate to describe the complex history of children as subjects and as objects of attention.

While many less eagerly avow the recovery or defense of the child, gestures clearly compatible with the history of sentiments approach are making a powerful comeback. Michael Witmore's deft and extensively researched *Pretty Creatures: Children and Fiction in the English Renaissance* details the extent to which children were central to early modern attempts to define the powers of fiction and theatricality. In spite of the virtues of this significant study, Witmore explicitly dissents from unsentimental approaches to children to articulate a vision compatible with a series of familiar stereotypes associated with the child: innocence, playfulness, vulnerability, imagination, and sexual innocence. In a reading of William Scrots's anamorphic painting of Edward Tudor, *Edward VI* (1546), Witmore insists,

Scrots saw something in the face of Edward that we, in our post-Foucauldian concern with the adult ironies of power, have failed to grasp. His painting suggests that children and the products of the imagination are kin. (4)

Similarly, Carol Rutter's often-ingenious analysis of contemporary fascination with Shakespearean boyhood, *Shakespeare and Child's Play: Performing Lost Boys on the Stage and Screen*, refutes the tradition of work on the history of childhood initiated by Ariès. Yet, it does so by retreating into threatened child-like qualities – loss, play, and nostalgia.

Far from being trivial in [Shakespeare's] writing, [children] are central, constitutive of adult projects. Simultaneously the embodiment of the future the adult plans but knows he will not live to see and the nostalgic recollection of the adult's innocent past, children in Shakespeare are stubbornly material, getting in the adult's way. (xiv)

For all their sophistication and nuance, Rutter and Witmore, echo pronouncements about the fragility and vulnerability of childhood familiar from the Romantic cult of childhood and even re-articulated by Neil Postman's *The Disappearance of Childhood*, which describes children as 'living messages we send to a time we will not see' (xi). While Postman associates the emergence of childhood with the rise of print culture, that history only matters as evidence of the persistent waning of childhood in the face of the corrupting influence of adult sex and violence. The child exists, then, to be ruined and attention to the child is, yet again, an act of rescue. Morris Henry Partee proposes a less innocent Shakespearean child but that child's aggression and depravity results from pervasive mistreatment:

Basically sympathetic to the innocence and vulnerability of children, he recognizes in them an element of cruelty. The children have a legitimate foundation for their resentment. The reality of parental and social violence often obscures the ideal of familial affection. (11)

This, then, is yet another child in need of saving. Sustained, sentimental interest in familial affection similarly motivates essays by Hattie Fletcher and Marianne Novy concerned with how 'emotions related both to having children and having memories of children are central to the identities of many of the characters' in Shakespeare's plays (49). Elsewhere, Novy argues Shakespeare's romances depict the relationship between nature and nurture suggested by adoptive children and foster parents. But this return to a parental focus makes one wonder about the complex affiliations of early modern children who were both cultural and familial property.

### *The Once and Future Child*

A wealth of insightful historicizing work has emerged on early modern children and childhood, making so many kinds of new research possible. Interestingly enough, and in spite of the ambition not to sentimentalize children, an affectively heightened response to the figure of the child has prevailed and, arguably, prevented other kinds of analysis. I want to close by suggesting ways of expanding our approaches to early modern child figures and Shakespearean children in need of our attention.

### SEXUALITY AND NORMATIVITY

I have suggested that a consequence of past approaches to the figure of the child has been to neglect sexuality as a central, defining element in early modernity. To be sure, scholars have at times attended to the ways in which child actors have been subject to attention that emerges from facets of theatrical experience, including the play texts themselves and resulting theatrical situations, the gendering of the boy actor, and the potentially erotic dynamics of labor embedded in all forms of apprenticeship.<sup>4</sup> As a result, some have struggled to conceive of children as more than merely sexual objects, often resulting in the rejection or omission of a more complex and complete account of representations of childhood sexuality. Such gestures become especially problematic when one considers the necessity of distinguishing between the figure of the boy actor and the figure of the child in Shakespeare's poems and plays. Certainly the two figures overlap to some extent, and Shakespeare's plays include puns about the boy actors. But it seems that concern for the exploitability of the apprenticed boy actor, whether in an adult or child company, has occluded conversations about the sexuality of the child.

Sexuality did, however, arise as a focus quite early in accounts of the history of early modern childhood as the border between adult sexuality and childhood innocence seemed anything but secure. Ariès argues, that though

[o]ne of the unwritten laws of contemporary morality, the strictest and best respected of all, requires adults to avoid any reference, above all any humorous reference, to sexual matters in the presence of children. This notion was entirely foreign to the society of old. (100)



In spite of this early start, one finds fairly little sustained work to correct, confirm, or expand on the views of Ariès or, more generally, on the sexuality of early modern children. Shakespeare does offer us not a few portraits of children in complex relationships to adult sexuality. The examples of Arthur, in *King John*, and Mamillius, in *The Winter's Tale* come to mind immediately as does that obscure object of desire in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the changeling boy who occasions such bitter dissent between Titania and Oberon.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike scholars of medieval and Renaissance childhood, those of later periods have attended extensively and recently to the child as erotic subject and object. Michel Foucault's landmark *The History of Sexuality* had identified within the sentimental attachment to childhood education an impulse to manage the sexuality of the child. James R. Kincaid has explored the relationship between sentimentality and sexuality in *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, which he also treats in contemporary American culture in his later work *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Kincaid's work has been explored and extended in Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley's collection *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, which authors who elsewhere explore the eroticization of the child, including Kathryn Bond Stockton's recent *The Queer Child: Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. These titles bring a welcome focus on children, yet such works would have benefited from perspectives afforded by a longer history of sexuality with respect to the child. Moreover, scholars of a variety of periods and persuasions have been interested in the mechanisms by which cultures produce normativity. The sexuality of the child is, therefore, not merely an anarchic or perverse force to be managed but also the site of an articulation of norms enforceable through a variety of cultural institutions, from the medical to the educational.

## POLITICAL FUTURITY

As an outgrowth of the relationship between children and sexuality, we might consider more broadly reproductive discourse with respect to the temporality of the child, since children tend to serve as both indices of cultural nostalgia and harbingers of potential yet to be realized. Lee Edelman's innovative *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* examines the child as the ultimate figure of 'reproductive futurism'. Edelman's account offers a powerful understanding of the temporal ramifications of a notion of childhood that organizes the public sphere. The child becomes the 'perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention' (3). The struggle to fight for children or save the children becomes an index of the survival of the body politic, justifying the maintenance of the status quo and the disciplining of those that fail to conform to that status quo. This argument would cast efforts to 'save' children, recuperate their agency, recover them from history, or construe them as a culture's 'future' – in a much more pessimistic light. Given the complex relationship of the early modern child to the identity of the larger family and to the family's genealogical impulse, Edelman's notion of political futurity might be enriched historically in debates about the history of childhood. The *Henry VI* plays imagine the brutality of civil war as genealogical violence, in the slaying of Rutland but more pointedly in twinned scenes in which a father unwittingly slays his son and another son unwittingly slays his father. But the tragedy of political futurity lodges most potently in *Macbeth*, a play not merely committed to killing off children, as Rutter argues,<sup>6</sup>

but to annihilating genealogy, as indicated by the phantasms Macbeth spies in Hecate's haunt – the bloody babe, the crowned child, the armed head, and the line of kings stretching from Macbeth's present to Shakespeare's.

## SOVEREIGNTY

I have suggested that the attempt to reclaim traces of children's agency may distort the figure of the child. But it is by no means true that the figure of the child was absent from conversations about agency and political sovereignty in early modernity. Take the famous legal case featured in Edmund Plowden's commentaries, which involved Queen Elizabeth's attempt to secure rights over the duchy of Lancaster. Elizabeth wanted to invalidate an agreement made by her predecessor, the boy king Edward VI. She deployed the notion of the king's two bodies to do so, questioning whether Edward VI had not in fact made a legal agreement in his natural body while still in his minority that would render that agreement invalid. The decision went in favor of the divine body of Edward VI, for

no act which the King does as King, shall be defeated by his Nonage ... For the King has in him two Bodies, viz., a Body natural, and a Body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like Defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People ... what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body. (cited in Kantorowicz, 7)

Elizabeth may have lost this ruling, but her case suggests that in fact the child's body could be imagined to interrupt the prerogatives of the divine king who knows neither non-age nor age nor infirmity. And even as this ruling articulates a fantasy of the ageless body of the king, the wellspring of legal and sovereign authority in this case is the tenuous, natural body of a child.

Though it turned out that Edward's body was more than sufficient in this case, the many boy kings of Shakespearean tragedy and history suggest the need for a political theology of the child's body. Clearly, those works of Shakespeare that feature child kings, princes, or heirs invoke a series of political problems that emerge from the minority status of the child. We might indeed argue that the problem of minority rule for royal children possesses a synecdochal relationship to forms of partial citizenship emblemized by but no means restricted to children. In addition to examining how citizenship and agency pertain specifically to children in Shakespeare's England, we might also profitably turn to the question of how Shakespeare's child figures are implicated in larger conversations about the prerogatives of sovereignty in an age in which the often desperate re-assertion of a rapidly waning culture of royal absolutism rested on political theology. To what extent might we understand the child as a transfer point of sovereignty from monarch to citizen and from the body of the king or the territory of the nation to the people and the populace? To return to the figure of Arthur in *King John*, how are we to understand the corrosive effect Arthur seems to have on King John's sovereignty? Might this have anything to do with one of the notable historical *absences* from that play, the introduction of the Magna Carta, which famously limits the sovereignty of the monarch? That is to say, does the figure of the child substitute for the limitation of traditional forms of sovereignty while also becoming the point of transfer of sovereignty from the king's body to other bodies?

## HUMANITY

Perhaps the temptation to sentimentalize child figures in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries finds a profound stumbling block in the complex relationship children held with respect to the idea of the human. More directly, one might ask if the child of early modernity can be described as human. Let's take again the changeling child of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In a play full of a diversity of significant forms of life – fairies, monarchs, aristocrats, rude mechanicals, plants, and human-animal hybrids – under what category is a child no less a changeling? Erica Fudge examines the child-human divide in considering how a capacity for laughter distinguishes humans from animals in early modern Aristotelian logic; the child's relationship to laughter thus indicates that the child's humanity would be tenuous, only acquired through proper rearing and pedagogy. Witmore's *Pretty Creatures* expands on the vexed relationship of children and child performers to the human in the Renaissance, taking seriously that term 'creature' as a way of describing the child. His analyses of the relationship between fiction and childhood in Renaissance England conjures up the capacity of the child for 'spontaneous mimicry' or 'nearly automatic, reflexlike action' placed the child in relation to automata, witches, and other quasi- or non-human creatures. The development of critical approaches to the 'posthuman' or the 'posthumanities', often associated with animal studies, science and technology studies, and systems theory, might offer a useful vantage on the partial humanity of the child in early modernity.<sup>7</sup> We might even begin with the absent source of contention between Titania and Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, referred to variously as a boy, a henchman, and a changeling. What precisely is this obscure object of desire – the son of an Indian king, an ordinary boy pressed into service, or an otherworldly creature? Would each possess the same relationship to the human in a play filled with many varieties of animals, humans, fairies, and other hybrids?<sup>8</sup> How might such differences matter? Would the part or non-humanity of the child impact our understanding of the humanity of adults?

## EXCHANGEABILITY

Perhaps it is no surprise that Shakespeare's drama, which was produced in an era fond of stories of changeling children, would find such interest in the mobility, transferability, and exchangeability of children. If this is a development especially prominent in plays featuring shipwrecks or sea voyages – *Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *Tempest*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale* – the preponderance of lost and found children suggests that we inquire as to how we might best describe the economy of the child, monetary and otherwise. Patricia Fumerton understands the culture of fostering among early modern aristocrats in England and Ireland through the lens of anthropological gift theory; each 'gifted' child created bonds of obligation and loyalty ultimately centered on Queen Elizabeth who managed these exchanges. In addition to an economy of the gift in the fostering of children, the sea-faring plays I have already mentioned suggest an economic understanding of the child related to maritime trade out of which emerged cultures of insurance and risk management relevant to the political futurity associated with the child. Moreover, as Busse has explored the connections between usury and reproduction, she has

come to conceive of the child as a material, produced thing governed by economic discourse and comprehensible as a commodity.<sup>9</sup>

We might also consider the arguments of Viviana A. Zelizer, who argues in *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Values of Children that between the 1870s and 1930s*, the American child witnessed a massive transformation from a source of labor and expense to an ‘economically ‘worthless’ but emotionally ‘priceless’ child’ that entirely conditions contemporary views of childhood. How do we understand the cultural value of early modern children with respect to the competition between economic and sentimental values? Does this offer ways of thinking about children of differing class positions? How do the institutions of apprenticeship, the culture of the boy actor, and the cultivation of children’s companies expose early modern ways of valuing children?

### *Shakespeare’s Child Figures*

Shakespeare left us with a tempting array of children in his plays. What he did not leave was a definition of ‘childhood’ or an instruction manual for ‘the child’. Even referring to Shakespeare’s ‘children’ as an ambiguously defined class of beings or a segment of the population seems deeply problematic. Some scholars suggest that the birth of this universal ‘child’, a category that would encompass all of the children in Shakespeare’s works, might not arise until the 19th century (Hendrick 35). While ‘childhood’ might refer to a developmental phase of life relative to earlier phases (such as infancy) or later ones (such as youth, adolescence, or adulthood), the remainders of a classical scheme of the divisions or ages of man (evident in the oft-cited speech of Jacques about the seven ages of life in *As You Like It*) reveal little more than cliché. The terms we associate with this subject are murky and in a state of historical flux. Shakespeare deployed many forms of the word ‘child’ (child, child-killer, childish, childishness, child-like) but the over 300 instances of child or children (the latter often but not exclusively used to refer to a particular person’s offspring) overwhelm instances of ‘childhood’, which are few (less than a dozen). Other terms for pre-adult figures in Shakespeare’s work, occurring in great frequency in some instances (boy), or lesser frequency in others (girl, infant, babe). The taxonomic confusion no doubt explains the various and discrepant enumerations of Shakespeare’s child parts: 30, 39, 45, or over 50, depending on which scholar you read. Does one include infants or is the speechless babe (the *infans*) a separate category? What about adolescents? What about children, such as Miranda and Marina, who are likely to be adolescents or young adults yet who are consistently interpellated as children?

Shakespeare’s ambition in contemplating children was too complex for definition and too innovative for those child figures he imagined to be merely repositories from which data about children in the Renaissance might be extracted. They are neither realistic representations nor cultural composites. To be sure, interdisciplinary approaches to the history of childhood have enriched our understanding of literary representations of children, as have richly textured accounts of both early modern children’s literature and education<sup>10</sup> and the institutions of child acting and theatrical apprenticeship in the early modern theater.<sup>11</sup> Yet, we would be mistaken to assume that the precocious contradictions that we refer to as ‘Shakespeare’s children’ were not also imaginative thought experiments in response to deeply troubling questions about the nature

of time, value, sexuality, sovereignty, and the human. If these figures reflect cultural debates about the nature of children and childhood, then they do as points of fracture amidst often contradictory expectations. Moreover, it is from their nature as powerful hybrids of imagination and history that we have the most to learn.

Throughout this essay, I refer to children as ‘figures’. In *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, Erich Auerbach traces figura in its evolution from classical to medieval Christian use, noticing the way a word that describes shape or ‘plastic form’, comes to refer prophetically to phenomena whose spiritual meaning depends on future fulfillment that is also material and historical: ‘Real historical figures are to be interpreted spiritually... but the interpretation points to a carnal, hence historical fulfillment ... for the truth has become history or flesh’ (34). Thus was born a new kind of interpretation to be distinguished from allegorical readings of spiritual truth. In figural interpretation, the historical and material character of events and persons read typologically would be preserved even as their truth was to be found in future fulfillment or ultimate truths. When we think of child figures, in Shakespeare or in early modernity generally, we need not imagine them as necessarily religious or spiritual figures. Rather, we must consider these children as historically and materially grounded figures compelled to signify, strenuously laboring with respect to the futurity of cultural fulfillment. To witness that labor is to understand Shakespeare’s children.

### *Short Biography*

Joseph Campana is a poet, scholar, and arts reviewer. His essays on Spenser, Shakespeare, Nashe, Middleton, early modern poetics, the history of sexuality, and other topics appear in *PMLA*, *Modern Philology*, *Shakespeare*, *Prose Studies*, and elsewhere. He is currently completing *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Masculinity* (forthcoming, Fordham University Press), while beginning a new project *The Child’s Two Bodies*, a study of figurations of children and sovereignty in the works of Shakespeare. He is the author of a collection of poetry, *The Book of Faces* (Graywolf, 2005) with poems in *Slate*, *Kenyon Review*, *Poetry*, *Conjunctions*, *Guernica*, and other venues. He is the recipient of the Isabel MacCaffrey Essay Prize from the International Spenser Society, the Crompton-Noll Essay Award from the GL-Q Caucus of the MLA, the Glenn Luschei award for poems published in *Prairie Schooner*, and artist’s grants from the NEA and the Houston Arts Alliance. He teaches Renaissance literature and creative writing at Rice University.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> See overviews by Cunningham, Jenks, and Heywood.

<sup>2</sup> For an extended account of the Puritan attitudes to children see Sommerville.

<sup>3</sup> My point is not to reduce or impugn Cunningham's contribution to the history of childhood by referring only to this popular text. Indeed, Cunningham has authored highly influential studies of children, including *Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood Since the Seventeenth Century* (Blackwell, 1991) and *Children and Childhood in Western Society Since 1500* (Longman, 2005), the latter of which is now in its second edition. However, the translation of Cunningham's work to a more popular idiom has emphasized the more problematically sentimental aspects of the history of childhood.

<sup>4</sup> On the particular way in which sexual puns in plays performed by the Whitefriars company eroticize the boy actors, see Bly.

<sup>5</sup> On Arthur and the sexualization of sentimentality in *King John* and *Richard III*, see Campana.

<sup>6</sup> See Rutter's chapter 'Precious Motives, Seeds of Time: Killing Futures in *Macbeth*' (154–204).

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of debates around the category of the posthuman, see Wolfe. For a series of interventions in the medieval or early modern posthuman, see the journal *postmedieval* 1.1–2 (2010) for the inaugural special issue entitled 'When did we become post/human?'

<sup>8</sup> See Bach, who argues for an animal continuum in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that includes humans, animals, and fairies. While Bach adds children into that continuum, the 'children' of the play are primarily metaphorical (in figures described as child-like). She does not discuss the changeling boy.

<sup>9</sup> See Busse, 'Profitable Children' for an overview of these connections.

<sup>10</sup> See Piesse (2004) and Lamb (2010).

<sup>11</sup> An impressive and extensive body of work has evolved on the figure of the boy actor, including studies by Shapiro, Munro, Lamb (2009), and Belsey (2005), among others.

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